COVID-Conscious Lesbian Kinship
By Sweetfern

This zine is not an end, but a beginning. It is the beginning of a way in which I have begun to think about and live my life. It is my first line of dialogue in a conversation in which I plan to spend the rest of my life. With that in consideration, I offer it humbly, with the full knowledge that many others have been living and speaking and loving to each other in this way forever, stretching into the past and future. With that in consideration, I offer it truly and deeply, with the force of all the conviction and vulnerability I have to give.

When I first began taking precautions against COVID-19 in 2020, I found myself falling through the cracks in my perception of reality and into an entirely new landscape of risk and care. Since then, I have been exploring the contours of that landscape. I have found the world of my own adulthood to be much more fragile and strange than I'd have imagined. Like all young people (or all people in general, I am starting to guess), I am in the process of finding my place within this unstable and changeable world.

Amidst horror and tragedy, one of the gifts that growing up in this ongoing pandemic is teaching me is the value of those kin who care for each other through crisis. I have simultaneously become more expansive in the networks of people who I exchange care with (in a mutual aid sense), and increasingly selective about the people whom I bring close to me (in an intimate, social, and physical sense.) I am recognizing the political, personal, and material ramifications of the people with whom I share time, space, and even *air* with.

Who are the people who still make an effort to see me when I share boundaries around COVID safety or decline unsafe events? Who are the people I trust to have honesty and integrity when it comes to the risks of seeing one another? Who are the people who will respect the boundaries of my body and my mind? With whom do I share an ethic of care? Are those the people who I am investing my time into? With whom am I reciprocating care?

What are the risks I am taking, and what do I gain by taking those risks? How do those risks impact the most vulnerable people I am in contact with? Am I trustworthy and reliable as a risk taker and friend/family member/comrade/etc.? Where are the places in which our physical safety needs differ or intersect, and how do we address these needs in relationship with one another? What safety plans do I have with my kinfolk? What risks have we discussed, or not discussed?

Many of these questions are not new to anyone who exists in a marginalized community. I use the word community here not to signify identity affiliation, but to refer to a group of people who exchange mutual aid (which *may be* based around identity and resistance to oppression.) When groups support each other through a community network that is under onslaught from oppressive forces, considerations of risk and precaution are a part of care by default. Immunocompromised and chronically ill communities have been asking these questions out of necessity long before COVID hit and able-bodied radicals like me jumped on board.

Queer communities are also no stranger to considerations of illness and precaution being part of ongoing mutual aid. (It is relevant to emphasize here that not all *queer people* exist in *queer communities*, by virtue of inaccessibility and/or by choice.) In response to the AIDS pandemic, queer communities rallied around collective care of sick kinfolk and comrades, activism and advocacy calling for serious public health support, and grassroots public health measures such as horizontal education and condom use. As queer people, we carry this legacy of pandemic resistance and collective care in our shared memory and self-narratives. It is our responsibility to use the knowledge nestled in this legacy to confront similar existential threats of pandemic injustice, i.e. COVID.

On the contrary, however, queer people in the US have by and large left COVID precautions to the wayside. Immunocompromised and chronically ill people have been shouting from the rooftops about the deadly and disabling effects of this disease that, according to publicly available wastewater testing data, is still running rampant in the US—and yet we do nothing. We must act to protect ourselves and our queer communities (knowing that COVID disproportionately affects queer people and people of the global majority), and most importantly, we must stand in solidarity with our immunocompromised comrades who have a right to clean air as a matter of accessibility. We must wear respirator type masks (KF94, KN95, N95, etc.), advocate for reinstating mask mandates, fight back against mask bans, talk to our kinfolk about COVID precautions, and advocate for widespread air filtration.

Queerness is resistant relationality. It is about building relationships with one another that stand in opposition to the tyranny of the status quo, that are life-affirming and based in creating alternative kinship. In this definition, the very practice of centering illness precaution as a part of collective and interpersonal care is queer, as it defies the capitalist, eugenicist, "back-to-normal" narrative that values profit over human lives (particularly disabled lives.) Cultivating resistant relationality is the central project of queerness, both on a personal and collective level.

I did not always have such a robust understanding of the nature of queerness, or even the nature of my own queerness, and I am sure that both will continue to shift and expand over time as they have in the last few years. I first understood myself as queer when I began to identify as bisexual while in a straight-passing relationship. Through polyamory, I found myself grasping vaguely at a queer relationality that I yearned for, yet was not engaged in. Eventually, through a visibly queer relationship in which I was able to begin deconstructing some of my heteronormative relational practices, I came to understand myself as a lesbian (in no small part due to the patient prompting of my lovely dyke partner.)

Immediately, I have noticed the ways in which lesbianism changes my relational identity and practices. In choosing not to participate in the heteronormative dynamic of men's attraction to those they perceive as women, I am beginning to divest myself from the cultural power of heteronormativity. This is not to say that I am misandrist, only that I am disinterested in men—specifically in deeply intimate (platonic, romantic, or sexual) relationships with them. Lesbian decentering of men is not an exclusion of men from our community care practices or even our social spheres, but an exclusion of hegemonic masculinity from our sacred spaces.

Lesbianism is a relational practice and a communal sacred space belonging to those individuals who both experience misogyny and form intimate relationships with and attachments to others who experience misogyny. Lesbianism has historically necessitated a queered community care, including pandemic resistance during the AIDS pandemic. For this reason, I understand my COVID precaution and contemporary pandemic resistance as intrinsically connected with my lesbianism.

Lesbianism should be an expansive label, not a limiting one. The exclusion of hegemonic masculinity is a practice which demands creativity and exploration—pushing one to think outward from a core set of beliefs and actions instead of inward from a static wall of definition. It invites the generation of novel and resistant embodiments of masculinity and femininity, the inversion and perversion of gender-based norms in relationships, the building of community networks, and the creation of queer kinship. *Kinship* is the cultivation of intimate, anchored care, and often includes the sharing of sacred space. As with many of the ideas present in this zine, I can credit this focus on kinship to my partner, whose academic study is in large part focused on historical and literary interpretations of lesbian kinship.

(No doubt he could write this zine with more detail, research, and eloquence than I, but here we are. And then again, what better way to develop one's ideas on lesbian kinship than to steal them from one's lesbian lover?)

As I write this zine, I am 23 years old and am considering what forms of kinship I wish to cultivate in the future. When I think about *family*—those people with whom I choose to share significant life entanglements—I know that the future visions of family I hold will be driven by my commitment to COVID-concious (pandemic resistant) lesbian kinship in a relationship anarchy context. Like lesbianism in general, I feel this principle to be an expansive, not limiting one. I am excited by the prospect of discovering what forms this kinship might take, and in what ways it will change over the course of my life.

I encourage queer readers to consider what roles risk and care take in their relationships, and how they relate to pandemic resistance. I encourage COVID-conscious readers to consider how their pandemic caution and resistance has queered their relationalities. I encourage COVID-conscious lesbians to consider HOW RAD YOU ARE. I encourage anyone with questions, critiques, or responses to this zine to email me at sweetfernwrites@proton.me.